

The National Media Museum: achieving a sense of common purpose

How a national museum established a clear understanding of its role and enabled all its staff to play their part in delivering its brand promise.

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THE NATIONAL MEDIA MUSEUM

KEY INSIGHTS

- The Director constantly reinforces the links between current operations, external events and the strategy.
- An innovative programme of 'brand walk-throughs' was used to proactively engage employees in the relevance of the strategy to their post and the day-to-day running of the museum, and to enable good ideas to come forward.
- The museum's advocacy programme targets opinion formers and influencers and offers a two-way communication channel for promoting the interests of the museum.
- The museum learned the importance of accepting that you can't be completely different; so the key is to understand where to focus attention to achieve effective differentiation.

BACKGROUND

The National Media Museum (NMM) in Bradford, West Yorkshire is part of the National Museum of Science and Industry. At its launch in 1983 it was known as the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television, but changed its name in 2006 as part of a review of its identity and strategy.

The museum's collection contains over 3.5 million items of historical, cultural and social value, including such iconic objects as John Logie Baird's apparatus, the first photographic negative, and the Wombles puppets. It also incorporates the first permanent UK installation of an IMAX cinema as well as two standard cinemas.

It is a museum that is free to enter, operating primarily on public funding and attracting over 600,000 visitors per year, ranging from families and school parties to media professionals and enthusiasts. As well as permanent and temporary exhibitions, it hosts festivals which attract internationally-renowned speakers and runs learning programmes.

Colin Philpott took over as Director in 2004 and began a review process to establish the museum's strengths and key assets, which led to the name change, the current strategy, and all that that has since achieved.

PERFORMANCE

The success of their recent strategy review is evident in the visitor statistics.

Visitor satisfaction is extremely high:

- 99% of visitors are satisfied with their visit (including 82% who are very satisfied)
- 99% of visitors think staff are friendly and helpful
- 99% of visitors would recommend visiting to friends and family.

CREATING A NEW SENSE OF SELF

The museum's leadership decided to review their organisational assets and evaluate where their strengths lay. The new Director initiated a sequence of internal and external meetings to arrive at statements of the museum's vision and values, and, ultimately, a new strategy. As Colin says, "It wasn't about setting ourselves up to be something we aren't – or couldn't be – it was about finding a new emphasis that enabled us to continue to be relevant now and in the future". The museum's founding vision had been a belief that understanding how images are made led to an appreciation of the ideas they expressed, and the intentions and skills of image-makers.

The new mission now states the ambition to be as follows:

'The best museum in the world for inspiring people to learn about, engage with, and create media.'

This, and the short phrase they now use like a mantra, 'inspiring involvement in media', emerged from the process of internal consultation and brainstorming. It was in part inspired by memorable examples of bringing together media practitioners with people who might aspire to be media practitioners.

implementation was a definition of the museum's scope and being specific about what the NMM intended to include in its 'media' remit. To help potential visitors understand that the museum did not intend to cover all aspects of every medium, the new logo explicitly incorporates the elements that the NMM focuses on.

But identity is also about character and another part of the review process involved the management team devising half a dozen potential personality types which helped position the museum as, for example, entertainer/fun or expert/serious or custodian/caring. These were then tested out in research with staff, visitors, potential visitors and external stakeholders.

EMBEDDING AND MAINTAINING THE NEW IDENTITY

Having developed the core concepts of the museum's purpose, the style in which it wanted to achieve it, and the characteristics that exemplified it, the next stage was to agree a set of more specific objectives. These described what had to be done in order to achieve the core purpose, and the measures by which the organisation would assess its success. **The six objectives that it devised clearly flow directly from its mission statement:**

- To develop a unique, internationally 'best-in-class', inspiring media collection
- To create galleries, cinemas and spaces telling stories about media in an inspiring way
- To stage an exciting programme that connects media practitioners with audiences and inspires engagement
- To achieve greater regional, national and international profile and recognition as an authoritative voice about media
- To build a team that can inspire and tell stories about media
- To provide a sustainable financial base that ensures the museum can continue to develop.

And the three areas of measurement chosen to provide a way to monitor achievement are:

- Visitor numbers
- Visitor satisfaction
- Organisational reputation.



“One of my favourite stories, which epitomises what we're about, is when the producer of a film we were premiering at one of our film festivals got up to speak: he started by saying how he used to come to the museum as a child and could never have imagined one day he would come back to introduce his own film.”

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The next step was to identify projects to fulfil those objectives. These were a combination of programmes already established and new ones proposed and developed at the museum's programmes meetings. These programmes include, for example, the Life Online gallery, the world's first gallery to explore the impact of the internet, and 'Reminiscence sessions', which invite the public to come and share memories inspired by films, photographs or television programmes. Decisions on which projects to progress are based on their fit with the core purpose of inspiring involvement in media. Each one chosen is expected to contribute to at least one of the performance measures listed above (visitor numbers, visitor satisfaction, and organisational reputation).

For staff who are not part of the management team, their involvement in the development of NMM's identity didn't end with the strategy consultation process. The Director presented the final, signed off strategy to all staff but in order to give everyone the opportunity to get more immersed in the organisational identity, and to 'own' the strategy, he now established a programme of 'brand walk-throughs'. These are half day sessions for small groups of six to nine staff, made up of mixed groups from different teams. The first part of the session is a reminder of the museum's vision and values. Then the group looks at a particular aspect of what the museum does and tests it against the core purpose and how it contributes to the measures of success. By the end, every member of staff will have taken part in the programme. The topics being scrutinised by these groups include not just the exhibits but also services such as the café, and communications such as the museum's website. The programme began by using an external facilitator but now it's established, it will be managed internally.

LEADING A COHESIVE IDENTITY

The Director is clear that his role is not only to ensure that the organisation's direction of travel is right, but to keep everyone travelling in the same direction. In his own words:

"For me, personally, it's about constantly referring things back to the strategy, in any communication I do, both verbally and in my fortnightly blog. I always aim to reference the strategy, so when I am telling people about a good thing that's happened, I'll also say why it's good – how it contributes to the strategy – and similarly if something is bad, why it's bad. Without being too heavy-handed, constantly reinforcing the understanding of why we're here.

"It's part of my role to ensure that everyone in the museum understands the environment in which we exist and how we can ensure our continued existence. But as a leader my role shifts according to what phase of the lifecycle we're in. We've been going through a change process, related to the reduction in funding, so I have been heavily involved with internal communication, but more often I would say that my role is about being an advocate of the museum outside the organisation. That's one of the things I include in my blog – what I'm going to be doing in the coming fortnight, who I'm going to be talking to. It reminds people of the importance of those outside influencers and it also gives them a feel for how I can help to promote the museum."

The museum has developed an advocacy programme that entails making sure that it knows, and has a dialogue with, key people both regionally and in the professions and communities with which it works. Other key contacts are those who can encourage people to visit or influence funding. The Director plays a major role in representing the museum to this influential group and also seeks to raise its profile through his work as a media commentator and lecturer in Bradford and York.

A DISTINCTIVE IDENTITY?

For Colin, distinctiveness is a complex concept, as he explains:

"For me it's how you carve out a communication message which sets your museum – or whatever type of organisation you're in – apart from the rest. It's also about accepting that you can't be completely different, because there are certain things about being a museum which they all have in common, whether you are a museum of this or a museum of that. So distinctiveness is what we do that is either unique to us or not necessarily truly unique but territory that we've got pretty much to ourselves. We feel that we have marked out a distinctive territory, both in terms of the scope of the museum and in terms of what our purpose is. So it's not just about having an interesting heritage – it's what we do with that heritage to inspire people."

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COLIN PHILPOTT,
DIRECTOR, NATIONAL MEDIA MUSEUM